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## Qualitative Church Growth: An Overview and Evaluation of Selected Writings of Dallas Willard

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**Qualitative Church Growth: An Overview and Evaluation of  
Selected Writings of Dallas Willard**

**Larry S. McDonald**

In the minds of many the words “church growth” and “numerical growth” are synonymous. Yet writers of church growth literature acknowledge that this growth must encompass more than the mere expansion of numbers. Donald McGavran articulated the need for “churches nourished on the Bible and full of the Holy Spirit” as well as ones “so separated and holy that they remain pleasing to God.”<sup>1</sup> Peter Wagner emphasized the need for evangelism “to be geared toward making disciples.”<sup>2</sup> Ron Jenson and Jim Stevens defined church growth as “the balanced increase in quantity, quality, and organizational complexity of a local church.”<sup>3</sup> They believe these three components must balance each other. Even though leaders have acknowledged the need for qualitative growth, few address it. This writer believes it is time for the Church Growth Movement to access the literature available that can assist in developing a healthy qualitative growth.

According to Alister McGrath, “Spirituality is one of the most developing fields of Christian thought and practice.”<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging the tension in evangelicalism between those who emphasize theological propositions and those who emphasize personal holiness, McGrath sees the real danger as neglecting the heart.<sup>5</sup> In fact, McGrath sees “the perceived lack of a credible, coherent and distinctive spirituality [as] one of the greatest weaknesses facing evangelicals today.”<sup>6</sup> He laments the massive blind spots found in evangelical institutions by the neglect and devaluing of evangelical spirituality. McGrath asks,

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"Where are the journals of evangelical spirituality?" He sees an obvious need for work devoted to this topic.<sup>7</sup>

McGrath is not the only one sounding the cry. Bruce Demarest believes the "integration of head and hands into the disciplines of the heart . . . remains an unfinished task for today's children of the Reformation."<sup>8</sup> He maintains that evangelicals should follow the lead of Augustine, Calvin, and the Puritans to relate "intimately to the God who engages our minds and lovingly touches our hearts."<sup>9</sup> Encouraged by the contemporary trend in evangelical spirituality that seeks to recover the spiritual disciplines, Demarest states, "Although we live in an age that rejects discipline, evangelicals are rediscovering the classical spiritual disciplines. Books by Foster, Willard, Witney [*sic*], Bridges, and others helpfully interpret the disciplines for us today."<sup>10</sup>

In Demarest's latest work on spirituality, he states that Richard Foster is "the most popular living spiritual writer in the evangelical world."<sup>11</sup> The renewed interest on spiritual disciplines has been primarily dated to Richard Foster's<sup>12</sup> 1978 work, *Celebration of Discipline*.<sup>13</sup> But Foster acknowledges in his book that Dallas Willard mentored him in the spiritual disciplines for four years.<sup>14</sup> At that time, Willard had not written any of his articles or books on discipleship and spiritual disciplines. Yet he was the individual behind the scenes influencing a revival of personal spiritual discipline. This revival is still gaining momentum almost twenty-five years later. Since Willard has been this influential, his works bear scrutiny by the evangelical community. This article will give an overview of Willard's three books and offer initial observations and evaluations of his ideas as a means of further developing and refining qualitative church growth.

#### *On Willard's In Search Of Guidance*<sup>15</sup>

Willard, in his first work on the spiritual life, considers the search for God's guidance. He sees this guidance as developed by a conversational relationship with God. Willard is convinced that an inability to discern God's guidance stems from a failure to understand, accept and grow into this conversational relationship with God.<sup>16</sup> The thesis of this book affirms that God created man for fellowship with Himself and that He will speak to the individual human when it is appropriate.<sup>17</sup>

While embracing this affirmation, Willard recognizes the

paradox concerning divine guidance. On the one hand, numerous testimonies claim God's personal guidance by conscious communication from God. Yet, uncertainty pervades regarding how divine guidance works and its place in the church and the Christian life.<sup>18</sup>

Willard identifies three general problem areas which must be addressed. First, from the Bible and church history, it is known that God's communications come in many forms. The second problem deals with motivation. By some having an extreme preoccupation with knowing the will of God, a Christian may succumb to the pitfall of using it as a manipulative device for securing safety, comfort, and righteousness. Third, misunderstanding the nature of God and His intent for His people presents various extremes that individual Christians embrace.<sup>19</sup>

In light of these issues, Willard distinguishes three general guidelines for discerning God's direction. First, Willard believes that God's guidance for us is intended to develop into an "intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature persons who love each other."<sup>20</sup> Second, any attempt to understand divine guidance must be based upon the content of the Bible, and by extension, the lives of Christians who have lived throughout the ages. Third, God does not speak to believers because they are good nor does His speaking to Christians make them good. The fact of God's infallibility does not mean our reception of His message is the same.<sup>21</sup>

Willard thinks it is possible to clearly understand what life with God is like, in particular that a believer is never alone because of the presence of God. He discusses various forms which God's presence may take. Willard describes the first form as the dark night of the soul. This night depicts God's closeness to an individual which remains unevidenced. The second form is when one senses a powerful expression of God's presence. God's acting in extraordinary events encompasses the third form of God's presence. Lastly, a conversational relationship may exist in which God speaks to an individual through His Word or the mind of Christ. Willard sees three common positions taken that are hurtful to the search for guidance: "The message a minute" view, "It's all in the Bible" view, and "The whatever comes" view.<sup>22</sup>

Willard sets forth six ways in the Biblical record by which God addressed people. These ways include: phenomenon plus voice, supernatural messenger or angel, dreams and visions,

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audible voice, human voice, and the spirit of man.<sup>23</sup> Willard believes "there is no foundation in Scripture, in reason, or in the nature of things why any or all of these types of experiences might not be used by God today."<sup>24</sup> But Willard quickly affirms the close of the canon and the adequacy of the principles and doctrines that constitute the faith and practice of the Bible. He believes nothing further will be said by God to extend or contradict the Bible. Willard appears to make a distinction between "revelation" and "guidance" from God.<sup>25</sup>

Willard holds that the single basic truth outlining any relationship with God is the instrumentality of His Word.<sup>26</sup> He then shows how God rules, guides, and redeems through His Word. Man's redemption occurs in being birthed, engrafted, and washed by the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

How does one know if guidance comes from God or not? According to Willard, one can know "that the word is from God if it is the plain statement and meaning of the Bible or if it can be obtained from biblical teaching as a whole by a sound manner of interpretation."<sup>28</sup> Willard sees the combination of three lights as he states, "God's impressions within and His words without are always corroborated by His providence around, and we should quietly wait until those focus into one point."<sup>29</sup> He further elaborates by stating, "Yet all who have much experience in the way of Christ will know that it is somehow right to look for guidance in circumstances, the Bible, and inner impulses. And all will know that these three somehow serve to correct each other. While they provide no formula for making decisions, they must not be simply abandoned."<sup>30</sup>

Willard goes on to acknowledge the possibility that an individual can still be mistaken, given that no person is infallible. He then states that he finds comfort and encouragement in the face of his fallibility by his close association with the Bible. He concludes, "We have repeatedly emphasized the centrality of the written Word in the functioning of divine guidance. More of God's speaking to me, personally, has come in conjunction with study and teaching of the Bible than anything else."<sup>31</sup>

*On Willard's The Spirit Of The Disciplines*<sup>32</sup>

The manner through which God changes lives comprises Willard's second book on the spiritual life. In Willard's view, Christianity must address the need for human transformation as seriously as do modern revolutionary movements, if it is to suc-

ceed in guiding humanity. In addition, he sees a need to clarify and exemplify realistic methods of human transformation. His central claim in this book is that Christlikeness occurs by modeling the overall style of Jesus' life. Willard identifies the practices of Jesus as solitude and silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, intense study and meditation upon God's Word and God's ways, and service to others.<sup>33</sup>

Willard seeks to bring about a practical theology that answers the questions regarding how one grows spiritually. He sees practical theology's overall task as twofold. The first task is the effective proclamation of the gospel message to all humanity. Secondly, the task is to make disciples of every nation by developing these disciples' character into the character of Christ himself. Willard describes the phrase, "teaching them to do all things whatsoever I have commanded you," as the Great Omission from the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20.<sup>34</sup> He sees the revival of the disciplines for the spiritual life over these last twenty-five years as having great significance and potential for eliminating this omission.

Even with this revival, Willard sees a void of understanding in the theological basis of the disciplines. He states, "We need a foundation, a practical, workable theology of them. We must understand why the disciplines are integral to meaningful life in Christ."<sup>35</sup> Thus Willard does not attempt to write a practical book on how to practice the disciplines. Instead, he seeks to establish this one thought: "Full participation in the life of God's Kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ comes to us only through appropriate exercise in the disciplines for life in the Spirit."<sup>36</sup>

In seeking to develop a psychologically sound theology of the spiritual life and its disciplines, Willard attempts to deal with the most basic points about a person's relationship with God. He identifies four key areas which he develops as the basic thought structure of this work.<sup>37</sup>

First Willard seeks to clarify the nature of spiritual life itself. He believes the primary resource for the spiritual life is the human body. Willard argues that in Romans 6 Paul deals with "how our body and its members are to be transformed into servants of God through the replacement of habits of sin by habits of righteousness."<sup>38</sup> He points to three stages of personal redemption: 1) Baptized into Christ; 2) "Reckon" – A New Attitude; and, 3) Submitting our members to righteousness.<sup>39</sup>

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Willard sees the outcome of these three stages expressed in Romans 6:17-18 which says, "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you whole-heartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (NIV). He believes the practice which prepares us for righteous living includes not only actions directly commanded by Christ, but also those activities which help us carry out these commands. He sees the spiritual disciplines as a "vitally necessary submission of our body and its members to righteousness."<sup>40</sup>

Willard's foundational emphasis is upon the physical body as being primary in following Christ. Yet his discussion of this area leaves many unanswered questions. He is not clear in articulating the meaning of terms such as "old man," "new man," "flesh," "world," "spirit," and "soul." For Willard to place such importance upon the body in following Christ, clarity upon these terms is essential.

The second key area Willard addresses is the decline of the disciplines in Western Christianity. In this section Willard traces the extremes in practice and theology of monasticism and asceticism. Because of these extremes, Protestants have viewed negatively spiritual disciplines. Willard also identifies the modern mindset of searching for the easiest and most convenient lifestyle. Hedonism undergirds much of modern society.<sup>41</sup>

Willard's third key area defines spiritual disciplines and identifies the disciplines relevant for Christians today. According to Willard, spiritual disciplines are "an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and His Kingdom."<sup>42</sup> Willard sees the disciplines as activities that assist growth in grace with the goal of receiving more of Christ's life and power.

Willard groups the disciplines into areas of abstinence and engagement. He identifies the disciplines of abstinence as solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice. He sees solitude as most fundamental in beginning the spiritual life, and Willard also emphasizes the need to return to solitude often. The disciplines of engagement are study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.<sup>43</sup> Although he acknowledges that other disciplines can be added, Willard believes these are the foundational disciplines that will guide one to the right course of life.

It is unfortunate that Willard does not include evangelism as

a discipline of engagement. He rightly identifies weaknesses in the current day practice of evangelism, yet he does very little to articulate a positive example of how evangelism should be modeled. He does not give a practical example of how to lead someone to Christ, then guide them to continue in discipleship. Willard missed a golden opportunity to showcase how evangelism and discipleship are partners which walk hand-in-hand with each other. How could he include Bible study, worship, fellowship, and prayer as disciplines of engagement but exclude evangelism? He appears to view evangelism as an overflow of the Christian walk and negates it as an intentional practice or discipline.<sup>44</sup>

Willard then devotes an entire chapter addressing the issue of poverty and spirituality. He sees the idealization of poverty as one of the most dangerous illusions of Christians in the contemporary world. He concludes by affirming that stewardship is the true spiritual discipline in relation to wealth.<sup>45</sup>

The final key area Willard addresses is how a widespread transformation of character can transform the world. He sees faith alone as a basis from which the evil in human character can be addressed. Willard maintains one realistic hope for the world's problem as "the person and gospel of Jesus Christ, living here and now, in people who are his by total identification found through the spiritual disciplines."<sup>46</sup>

*On Willard's The Divine Conspiracy*<sup>47</sup>

Willard's third work on the spiritual life regards discipleship to Jesus as the very heart of the gospel.<sup>48</sup> He sees the current condition of Christians as one having little impact in churches and society. His main purpose in "this book on Jesus and his kingdom [is] to help us face this fact of the absence of Jesus the teacher and to change it."<sup>49</sup> Willard wants Christians to move past a consumer, bumper sticker mentality in order to experience the reality of following Christ and His teachings in this life. He believes the Sermon on the Mount provides the basis for such an understanding. Therefore, the six basic sections of *The Divine Conspiracy* are built upon the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>50</sup>

Section one deals with the background assumption that life in the kingdom relies upon Jesus (Matt. 4:17-25). Willard sees the problem as a "gospel of sin management." Conservatives focus upon a message of forgiveness of sin and eternal life in heaven. Liberals focus upon social evils and their elimination. Willard



believes transformation of life and character have been removed from the redemptive message.

Willard asks three penetrating questions for Christians leaders to ask themselves: "1) Does the gospel I preach and teach have a natural tendency to cause people who hear it to become full-time students of Jesus? 2) Would those who believe it become his apprentices as a natural 'next step?' 3) What can we reasonably expect would result from people actually believing the substance of my message?"<sup>51</sup> If only a gospel of sin management is preached, Willard argues the "resources of God's kingdom remain detached from human life."<sup>52</sup> He sees the answer as developing a straightforward presentation, "in word and life, of the reality of life now under God's rule, through reliance upon the word and person of Jesus. In this way we can naturally become his students or apprentices."<sup>53</sup>

Willard's assessment of those who emphasize forgiveness of sin and eternal life has brought him criticism. David Larsen accuses Willard of an assault on forensic justification and a minimization of the cross.<sup>54</sup> Willard appears to try to bring forth a valid point. He wants Christians to know that between forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven is a life-long relationship with Christ. Yet Willard sets himself up for criticism by using inflammatory language in stating that many "presume a Christ with no serious work other than redeeming humankind . . . they foster 'vampire Christians,' who only want a little blood for their sins but nothing more to do with Jesus until heaven, when they have to associate with him."<sup>55</sup> Willard certainly could have made his point without casting any doubt upon his view of the atonement.

The second section of this book deals with ordinary people living the life in the kingdom as the light and salt of the world (Matt. 5:1-20). Willard's view of the Beatitudes is unique in that he does not see them teaching how to be blessed. He does not believe they indicate conditions that please God. Rather, he thinks they single out cases that provide proof that the rule of God is available in all life circumstances. Willard believes the Beatitudes indicate people who, "from the human point of view, are regarded as most hopeless, most beyond all possibility of God's blessing or even interest, and exhibiting them as enjoying God's touch and abundant provision from the heavens."<sup>56</sup> Willard acknowledges that his teaching on the Beattitudes goes against the traditional interpretation of them yet he offers very

little substantiation for his views. Such a major shift from the traditional interpretation would necessitate a more thorough documentation of one's views in the mind of this writer.

The book's third section depicts the kingdom heart of goodness as God's kind of love (Matt. 5:21-48). Willard sees six contrasts as Jesus teaches of goodness beyond the Scribes and Pharisees. These contrasts include an intense desire to help without anger, contempt, or murder, sexual attraction without cultivation of lust or sex outside of marriage, a commitment to marriage with no divorce, speech without verbal manipulation by only stating how things are, or are not, refusal to harm the one who has harmed, and a commitment to love and bless one's enemy.<sup>57</sup>

Section four of the book comprises a warning against false securities (Matt. 6). Willard sees one of these false securities as a desire to win the approval of others, especially in bringing relief to the needy, praying in order to be seen by others, and fasting for exhibitionism and respectability. Another false security Willard cites is the desire to secure ourselves by means of material wealth. Willard believes either error will block interaction with God and healthy growth in the kingdom. He believes Christians need to please an "audience of one."<sup>58</sup>

The fifth section of this book is another warning against condemnation as well as a call to a community of prayerful love (Matt. 7:1-12). According to Willard, love is illustrated in three ways: 1) Not condemning or blaming others (Matt. 7:1-5); 2) Not forcing wonderful things upon them (Matt. 7:6); 3) Clearly asking for what is wanted from others—and from God (Matt. 7:7-11).<sup>59</sup> Willard sees confidence in God as the only thing that makes it possible to treat others as they should be treated.<sup>60</sup>

The book's final section concerns warnings about failing to follow what the Sermon on the Mount requires and the effects of that disobedience (Matt. 7:13-27). Willard sees four pictorial contrasts: 1) The narrow gate and the wide gate (Matt. 7:13-14); 2) The good tree and the bad tree (Matt. 7:15-20); 3) Final judgment for those who do God's will and for those who substitute good deeds (Matt. 7:21-23); and 4) Obedience or negligence by those who hear God's Word (Matt. 7:24-27).<sup>61</sup>

*The Divine Conspiracy* overviews discipleship to Jesus and develops a curriculum for Christlikeness. Willard concludes his work by stating that a disciple is "simply someone who has decided to be with another person in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is."<sup>62</sup>

Willard suggests the means to become a disciple as repeatedly expressing to Jesus our desire to see Him more fully. By using every opportunity to come to Christ an individual makes a decision to be His disciple.<sup>63</sup> It is implicit that one must first be a disciple before he is able to make disciples. His next intent must be to make disciples, to assist others to the knowledge that Jesus really is the Christ.<sup>64</sup>

Willard lays out a curriculum for Christlikeness by identifying four attributes that must *not* be primary objectives: 1) External conformity; 2) Profession of perfectly correct doctrine; 3) Special experiences; and 4) Faithfulness to the church.<sup>65</sup> Willard instead identifies two primary objectives for the disciple's course of training: 1) To develop a sincere love the Heavenly Father; and 2) To remove automatic responses against the kingdom of God, freeing the apprentice from old habitual patterns.<sup>66</sup> Finally, Willard sees a threefold dynamic he calls the "Golden Triangle" which brings about spiritual growth: 1) The action of the Holy Spirit; 2) Ordinary events of life; and 3) Planned disciplines to put on a new heart.<sup>67</sup>

#### *Initial Observations*

Willard's books have been enthusiastically received as filling a void within evangelicalism. They have challenged the church to move past the superficial, so that Christ can deeply transform individual believers as well as entire churches. His books have avoided simplistic formulas for spiritual success. Willard's achievement provides Christians a well-thought-out Biblical basis for discipleship.

However even given these accolades, shortcomings are worth noting. First, in the area of evangelism Willard rightly identifies weaknesses in current day practice. Yet he does very little to articulate a positive example of how evangelism should be modeled. In fact he seems to further drive a wedge between evangelism and discipleship. A more balanced presentation would have combined the two, showing their partnership with each other. A discussion of the Biblical doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification would have laid a solid foundation for the above combination.

A second area of deficiency lies in some of Willard's Biblical presentations. His view of the body as being primary in following Christ and his interpretation of the Beattitudes needs further work and clarification. He may be right in both of these areas,

but this writer needs further convincing.

In spite of these areas of concern, Willard's trilogy has much to offer on the spiritual life which supports qualitative church growth. His works provide a wealth of foundational material for developing believers' spiritual growth. While one continues to build the kingdom of God through reaching more people for Christ, one can use Willard's works in strengthening these new believers.

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